

intro

I am also not interested in eliminating marginality. The margin encircles  
the text on the page, and it holds many positions from which the  
text can be viewed.

--Jerry Tartaglia

I've investigated one main question in my research and creative work: what is the nature of mass culture and what are the alternatives to it? What are the conditions of the dominant commercial system, and how, and when, and under what circumstances is it possible to present a critical counter-culture? My concern is aimed at finding a strategy for media aimed at social and political change.

My specific object of concern is film and video, and to understand these media possibilities, I believe you have to understand the nature of an alternative media phenomenon: as a set of works, as alternate history, as a group of evolving counter institutions, as social and organizational base for individual artists. For this reason, my definition is basically larger than those who would discuss it specifically in terms of the art world. I see it as something that needs a broader perspective, seeing different forms, different strategies as appropriate for different historically specific phases or moments.

Several things motivate this project. As someone who teaches and writes about avant garde film and video, defining what the subject encompasses marks a foundational or basic step. I've often been uncomfortable with the usual strategies of relating specific works to the succession of 20C art movements, or finding an internal formal historical development, or featuring major media makers who contribute to the canon of great works. It's probably significantly a function of when I became aware of experimental media work. I was first excited and enthused about experimental films because they spoke directly to me as spectator and as an aspiring artist. They showed me things that I thought were important that were otherwise left out of the media, gave me experiences that I hadn't otherwise had, challenged me to imagine new things that art could do and express.

Those are fairly much part of a Romantic sensibility. The idea of art as creative expression, and as (fairly) direct communication from maker to receiver. But the time frame was specifically the late 1950s and 1960s, and at this moment of what is called the New American Cinema, the “underground” film movement saw itself as standing apart from, in opposition to the mainstream. The New American Cinema encompassed narrative, documentary, and abstract films and was defined much more by its social situation than its relation to art history or the gallery/museum art world. It was much more a movement/moment of constructing an alternative. In that sense it was parallel to or part of the Beat Generation, the Black Mountain artists, the newest tendencies in jazz (John Coltrane, etc.), in then-“new” arts such as photography--new to the gatekeepers of artworld consecration such as museum directors and academics .

### Toward a definition

One of the first acts in cultural analysis is setting up the terms of what will be studied. This is inevitably an inductive/deductive process in which the researcher starts with a broad intuitive sense of what needs to be defined and then tries to set up terms, boundaries, limits so that the work can move forward. But in the process, boundaries may change and definitions may need to be changed. The very definition of the field shapes what kinds of questions can be raised. The downside is that the work being done can simply be circular, and finally banal. The upside is that new ideas may come forward, and thus genuinely new knowledge can be generated.

[elaborate and differentiate]

Avant garde  
Experimental  
Underground  
New American Cinema  
Independent  
Sundance

My specific concern is the field of experimental film and video. What do we mean by “experimental”? That varies a bit with different historians and critics and artists having slightly different views,